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August 1988 / No. 6

CARING FOR CREATION

Call to the Latin American Churches

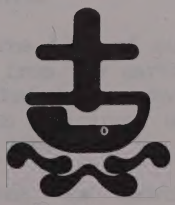
Costa Rica forestry and environment workshop

CARING FOR CREATION

CALL TO THE LATIN AMERICAN CHURCHES

San José, Costa Rica
15 July 1988

Produced by the first Workshop
on Deforestation and its effects on
Rural Development
sponsored by the World Council of Churches
Sub-Unit on Church and Society
in cooperation with
the Universidad Estatal a Distancia
Costa Rica



Translated from Spanish

DECLARATION TO THE CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA

This statement is the work of the first Latin American Workshop on Deforestation and its Effects on Rural Development held by Christian Church leaders. It met in San José, Costa Rica from the 8th to the 15th of July, 1988, to consider our responsibility for the devastating deforestation and rapid environmental deterioration that is occurring in Latin America.

We, the participants of this workshop, being convinced of our Christian responsibility to be faithful stewards of God's creation, and aware that in having allowed such destruction of the environment to have occurred we have sinned against God, its Creator, and our neighbours, make the following declaration:

1. God made all things - land, water, air, plants, animals and humankind - to live and work in harmony on the earth (Genesis 1). God is the Creator and we as God's creatures have been called to care for, cultivate, and preserve God's work. In this way, we accept our responsibility to be good stewards of creation, that is, to rationally make the best use of our resources so that all of creation, including humankind, may be sustained by a reasonable quality of life.

2. The overuse of natural resources has meant that many irreplaceable plants, animals, and minerals have completely disappeared. Two million trees are felled every day in the Amazon rain forests. In Central America, 12.800 square kilometers of forests have been destroyed. Twenty hectares of tropical forest are wiped out every minute. If we continue destroying the forests on such a scale, by the year 2000 (in only 12 years time) nearly one million species of flora and fauna will have disappeared. This destruction of the environment produces climatic changes that will endanger life over our entire planet.

3. Our life and the life of our descendents depends on the food produced from the earth, on the air we breathe, on the forests that have provided and should continue to provide us with medicines, wood, food, water, recreation, and many other things.

   We believe that the Church has a responsibility for safeguarding the production of food stuffs so that all might be fed, and that the purity of water and air, and the fertility of the soil might be maintained.

4. Many forest dwellers have been pushed out into desert areas by powerful people who waste the forests to enrich themselves. They have displaced the indigenous Americans forcing them to use less fertile land or to go into the highlands and fell more trees where they try to farm small patches of poor land. These changes cause significant alterations in the natural habitats of the local species. Large logging companies exploit our natural resources and make our people poor; they thwart conservationist efforts; they ruin our environment and make it hostile to us; they contaminate our soil, water, and air and eliminate animal, plant, and even human life in an unthinking and irresponsible manner. Mining operations negatively affect the environment and cause the premature death of miners. Governments too are at fault through their new agricultural frontiers policies in which they induce peasants onto lands which are not suitable for long-term farming.

5. There are still a few groups that respect nature and who cultivate it with their ancestral knowledge. They care for the forests and use the land wisely. They breathe pure air, enjoy a traditional life, and oppose the advances of modern civilization that would destroy their world. Their behavior is a positive challenge for those of us learning the advantages of an ancient way of life that could be lived in peace and harmony with creation.

6. Consumer propaganda and mass media as well as the content of our countries' educational systems would have us believe that development and "the good life" means: we should use a lot of imported goods; we should eat food that has been canned and preserved; we should search for prestige and power; we should consume as much energy as possible; we should look to entertain ourselves as individualists, and we should try to make a lot of money. The consumer approach makes us unaware of the damage we cause to the environment by our selfish desire for fine wood and luxurious buildings. We also unnecessarily use wood in agroindustrial combustion. We will continue to use animal furs until their species are nearly extinct - only to show off our wealth, prestige and power. We contaminate the air and the water simply because it is less costly than processing our waste. We squander energy in our homes at the expense of the forests and the rivers. What is even worse, we exploit workers and peasants for their labor - simply in order to better our own standard of living.

7. Some workers, peasants, and indigenous peoples are fighting to better their work conditions. But, they need land to work. They know intuitively that they must preserve nature so that all may benefit from it. They long to be able to live independently, to once again take up their traditional ways of caring for the earth, and to continue using the water and the soil. They need to receive fair prices for their products. They want to be able to use the technology that will enable them to keep from contaminating the soil and the streams. They are ready to cooperate as communities in order to better their standard of living.

8. The politicians and planners who make decisions regarding the use of natural resources have little or no awareness of the damage they cause to nature and to humankind when they treat these resources as something that is expendable, as something that is there to enrich those who own the land and those who control the money. Political decisions regarding agrarian reform, economic colonisation, energy production, means of communication, and the development of productive and residential infrastructures have contributed to the disappearance of immense regions of wet and dry tropical forests. They have caused the poverty and even the extinction of entire indigenous populations. Traditional cultural values have been lost. Also, the balance between nature and humankind has been broken. This means that God's plan for God's creation and God's creatures has been ignored. In spite of those factors beyond our control, we all share an individual responsibility to preserve the integrity of creation.

9. Christian churches have begun to be aware of the importance of working for peace - which is the fruit of justice. We call upon them to defend and maintain the integrity of creation which is the prerequisite for peaceful relationships between different social groups and for harmony with the Creator. In order to assure life, we must have peace, work for the good of all, respect the needs of the earth and be obedient before our Creator (Leviticus 25).

10. In the name of Christ whose sacrifice restored our original relationship with God, our neighbor and nature in obedience, peace, and the integrity of creation, we call all christians to come together in love and commitment and to respond to God's plan for humankind. We invite all to commit themselves with action in support of indigenous communities, workers, and urban dwellers so that with the united efforts of the Church and the governments of different countries the environment might be preserved and restored.

It is essential that we educate ourselves and also our children so that we might acquire the appropriate skills necessary for investigating problems related to the environment, and so that we can do everything possible to avoid contamination and improper use and removal of natural resources.

We make a special plea to those in positions of authority, be it religious, political, social, civil, or military, that this concern for environmental conservation be included in their plans and programs. We encourage the churches to address conservation concerns related to basic ecological processes, soil and water conservation and all living things, and to increase the biblical awareness of stewardship and the equal distribution of usable resources among the poor.

We invite interested members of the Christian community to write and join in the work of the Standing Stewardship Committee on the Sustainable and Suitable Use of Natural Resources.

San José, Costa Rica,
July 15, 1988

The First Workshop on Rural Development and Environmental Education, sponsored by The World Council of Churches, Switzerland and the Universidad Estatal a Distancia, Costa Rica.

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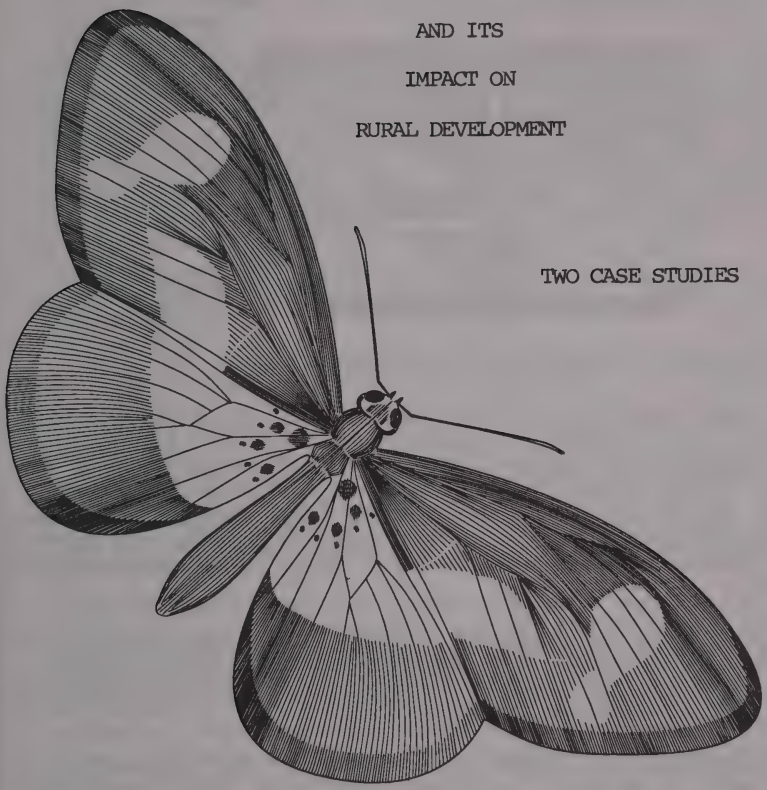
DEFORESTATION AND ITS IMPACT ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT

TWO CASE STUDIES



THE PEDRO MONCAYO COMMUNITY

Arturo, a member of the Pedro Moncayo community, tells us of the history of his people.

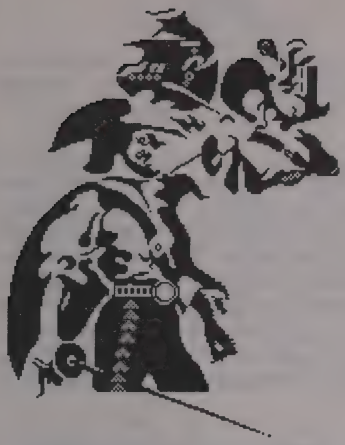
The Tabacundos, Tocachis, Cochasquis and other peoples belonging to the Quitua Nation were our ancestors. They lived in the Pedro Moncayo Canton in Ecuador.

In 1000 B.C. the Caras arrived and they joined with the Quituas to form the Quitua-Cara Nation. This union meant economic, social and political progress for our people. Our people worked the land together with the Mingas. They also worked together in making pottery as the designs on the pots and plates indicate, also on architectural feats such as pyramids and specially covered tombs. They grew corn, quinoa, potatoes, and they raised small animals. They perfected the agricultural calendar so they knew when to sow and harvest, and when the drought would come.

In the the 15th century, the Incas of Peru arrived to conquer our territories. The Quitua-Caras resisted the Incas for forty years. The Incas respected our culture, religion, and the lands of those who lived here. Nevertheless, they exchanged the local chief for one of their own, and it was he who ruled. The Incas brought with them certain advances such as the the decimal numerical system, the use of irrigation canals, and terraced farming. These things improved our agriculture.

By the middle of the sixteenth century (1530-1540) the Spanish conquistadors had arrived. They brought with them gunpowder, horses, the wheel, iron and the plow. In changing the way the crops were sown, they radically changed food production.

The conquistadors also brought with them their own religion and a different socio - economic structure which they used against our culture in an unreasonable manner in order to take our natural resources away from us. In doing so, they nearly exterminated the indigenous populations which they mercilessly exploited through forced labor, encomiendas (a type of slavery system used by the conquistadors in dividing up the "conquered" lands and peoples among themselves), and their workshops.



They abused and wasted the land. They exploited us to produce food for them and they took the gold and silver out of our mines to send back to their countries. This was the beginning of wide-spread revolts by indigenous peoples during the colonial period. Our people heroically resisted Spanish domination and oppression. There were leaders like General Ruminahui who fought to the death against the Spanish. We suffered under three centuries of colonisation until the ideas of Eugenio Espejo, the activity of our Latin American Father Bolivar, and the Sucre struggle brought an end to it all in 1822.

Yet the people remained poor without our ancestral lands; they lived wretched lives of unbelievable poverty. The young Ecuadorian Republic with its new criollo bosses maintained the brutal system of exploiting the poor that was begun by the Spanish. The land and the economic resources remained in the hands of a few who lived off the riches produced by the people's work. We went from being a Spanish colony to being an economic colony, first of England and then of the United States.

Rocio, mother of a poor family in the community, tells of how her family lives now in the Pedro Moncayo community.

"Our people have been plundered of our communal lands. Our fathers and mothers struggled so hard to retain the little communal land on which we live and to gain access to new lands. It has been a long haul; the struggle won us the first Agrarian Reform in 1964. Nevertheless, this law basically only gave the peasants a bit of poor land to keep them quiet; it did not affect the properties of the big landowners. We were given lands on the hillsides and in the mountains, the least fertile pieces without irrigation which would allow us to survive. Many families had to leave for the cities.

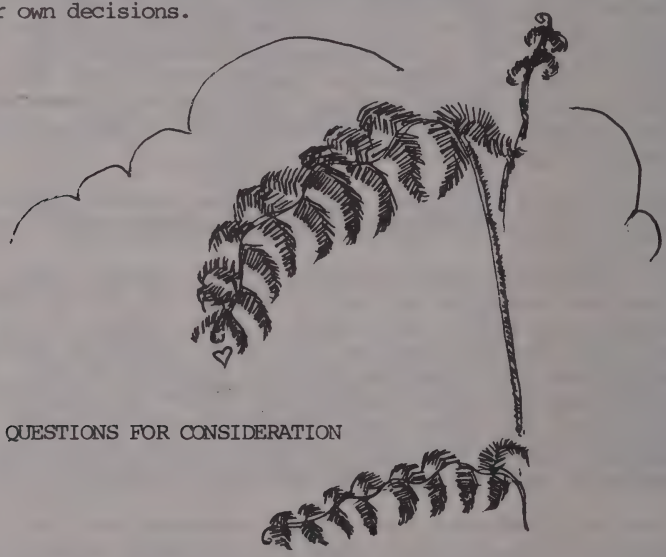
"Now, big landowners have formed companies, and for this they need land, our land, for which they will pay high prices. For many this has meant that they live like serfs of these companies on what used to be their own land. These companies produce flowers, strawberries and powdered milk with our sweat and our hard work, only to sell them in foreign markets and make themselves richer. Meanwhile, we become poorer and poorer. We are paid ridiculously low daily wages, even though for each dollar we are paid they make many more dollars in profit.

"We are forced to plant our corn, quinoa, and beans on small plots of land --but since we do not overuse the land we may survive on it. Even so, part of the family must go off to the cities to look for work, which makes us even poorer and separates us from our community.

"The companies do not produce food for the local people. We aren't going to eat roses, carnations, strawberries; in any case, things like that are sent to foreign markets.

"Those of us who jointly hold little plots of land are not going to sell out even though we are offered a lot of money. Without this land how could we live? We couldn't even produce a little food for our children. The big landowners don't understand that for us this little piece of land is life itself. If we leave it, we will die. That is why we have formed the Pedro Moncayo Peasants Union. We get together so that we can discuss our problems, share our joys, and fight against abuse and unfairness. We struggle together. The joint land holders and the communities work together to resolve the conflicts that arise as a result of the big landowners, the companies and the authorities."

We respect and we encourage respect of the peasants and indigenous peoples. We will not let ourselves be manipulated by the rich and we will make our own decisions.



QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Identify some of the first techniques that allowed the indigenous peoples to improve their agricultural practices while still remaining in harmony with the environment.

2. What was the effect of the displacement of people to the poorer lands?

3. List the reasons for the impoverishment of the community.

4. What besides the organisation of the people to rebuild their dignity would you recommend to the community in order to raise the productivity of their marginalised lands?

AN EXAMPLE

WORTHY OF IMITATION

Don Guido took seriously his responsibility to care for his seven hectare farm. His small tract faced two giant threats: urbanism, the city's threat to swallow up his piece of land, and high technology experts who criticise his traditional ways. Since Don Guido believed in caring for his inheritance in the best way possible, he believed that the land should not have only one crop. In addition to coffee one could find more than 100 different species of plants on his farm. He raises fruit-bearing trees, garden vegetables, decorative plants, corn and many other things.

Coffee is the cash crop. Nevertheless, the other foods he raises also benefit the family because they do not have to buy them in the market. "I live on my farm, I don't live from it," Don Guido is known to say. He knows the importance of eating produce at the right season and of raising vegetables without chemical poisons. "Life like this is priceless."

Don Guido cultivates the coffee with just the right amount of shade, he fertilises with organic material and, by tilling and building up areas, he avoids erosion from the rains. He also uses only the necessary agricultural chemicals, in moderate amounts. Don Guido has been put under pressure by experts to increase his coffee production by taking out the other plants. His response has been: "There is no worse a plague than certain agronomists." There have been other farmers who have not been able to stand as firm as Don Guido. He enjoys the honor of being admired by the townspeople who look up to him as a leader.

Why doesn't Don Guido give in? He doesn't give in because he loves the land that his grandparents left to him, and he cares for it with pride for his own children and grandchildren. "Plants are like human beings," he says, "they need shade and shelter to protect them, and they themselves are necessary to replenish the soil." Don Guido's experience has been confirmed by ecologists who say that the system of mixing crops allows the farmer to produce coffee for a longer period of time, that the soil requires less chemical fertilisers, and that is less subject to erosion. Moreover, scientists confirm that mixed crops farms with open fencing are more suitable environments for wild animals that can't survive on large farms which produce only coffee.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Do you know of cases like that of Don Guido in your community?

2. What advantages or disadvantages do these farmers have?

3. Identify two or three contributing factors to Don Guido's ongoing production.

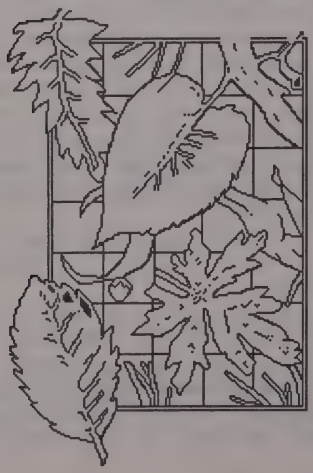
CREATION AND STEWARDSHIP

We want to reflect on our Christian tradition's approach to creation, particularly as it has manifested itself in Latin America. In the midst of this ongoing and continuous destruction of our environment we reaffirm our faith in the covenant between God and people for a sustainable use of creation - as a matter of justice, and as a prerequisite for true peace.

The Creator God, the Christian God, the God of the people of Israel, is a God who creates and liberates. The oldest biblical creed (Deuteronomy 26: 5-9) was passed on from generation to generation. The Israelites knew their God as liberator and creator. This God liberated them from the oppression in Egypt and placed them in the promised land where they fulfilled their divine obligations to the land, animals and plants. In this way, the people of Israel reaffirmed and deepened their relationship to the creator and liberator God. Liberation is the final destiny of creation (Isaiah 45: 8-9).

We too, are created to be free. Freedom and justice are the two historical tasks of humankind in the creative process. Creation is a whole; it is a harmonious system without contradictions. Humankind and the earth form a unity (Genesis 2). Humankind was made from the earth and will return to the earth. The earth actively participates in the creative process: it gives life to the plants and the animals (Genesis 1: 24). Humankind does not exist apart from nature; humankind is part of the integrity of creation (Job 38: 4-39; Psalm 104).

Humankind, Co-creator



Human beings, as they are created in the likeness of God, assume a responsibility as stewards (Genesis 1: 26). Thus, they have a special relationship with God and other creatures. Humankind was created to be like God and was called to cooperate with God in creation.

Creation is not yet complete. God's project with regard to creation includes also the liberation of nature. Humankind's cooperation is essential for the realisation of this task. We are co-creators with God through human expressions, work, and love.

The earth is the Lord's

The Bible affirms that the earth can not be "private" property because it is God's creation. In order that human beings would not be tempted to become the earth's owner it is written: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Psalm 24). The book of Leviticus states this as a law: "And the land shall not be sold forever: for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (25:23). Humankind has the right only to work the land, sow and harvest the fruit.

The land has the right of redemption (Leviticus 25:24). The sabbatical year has two purposes: the soil gets a rest and the poor get to eat. The earth must not be exploited to its limit; the balance within creation must be maintained and the fertility of the soil must be safeguarded. The text in Leviticus emphasises the ecological function of rest for the earth while the book of Exodus lays emphasis upon its social function.

The year of Jubilee, the feast of pardon, or the day of reconciliation, is celebrated every fifty years. Freedom is proclaimed for all the inhabitants of the earth (Leviticus 25: 10). The Jubilee celebration allows for rest, for freedom of all in slavery, and the redemption of the land (Leviticus 25: 8-34). The earth is the Lord's. The Israelites had laws that protected the earth and humankind. These are the two dimensions of the task of liberation and creation.

The new earth

All of creation will be transformed into a new heaven and a new earth and the past will be remembered no more (Isaiah 65: 17). In the beginning, the earth was full of violence (Genesis 6: 11) and it was corrupt. The whole of creation entered into crisis, and God suffered because of human violence. God's response is the covenant with creation - in spite of human sin. So we have hope. This covenant involves faith and confidence in the creative process in order to reestablish ecological balance, and to bring justice to all of creation.

And God said,"Let the earth put forth
vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit
trees bearing fruit which is their seed,
each according to its kind upon the earth."
And it was so.

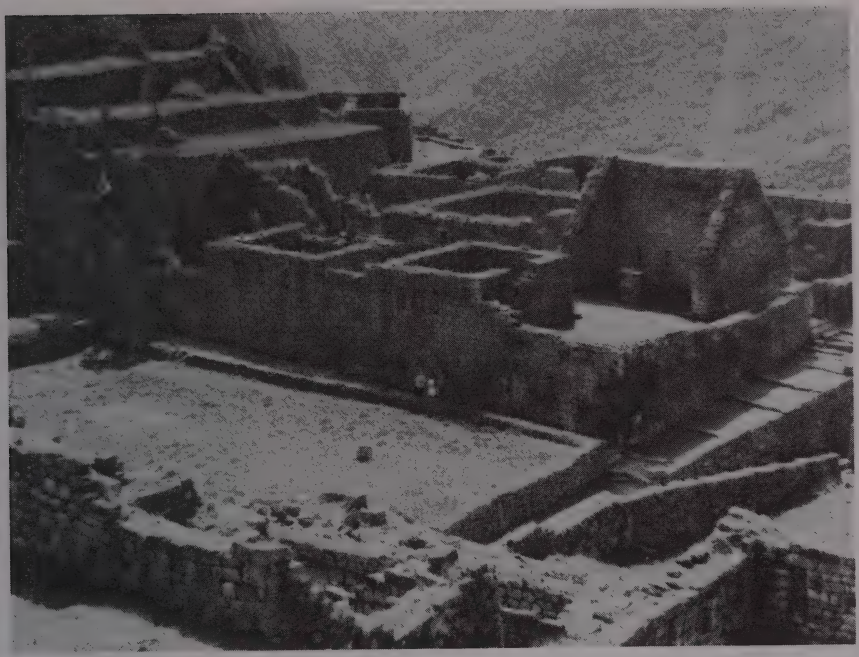
Genesis 1:11

"By your servants you have mocked the Lord,
and you have said
With my many chariots
I have gone up the heights of the mountains,
to the far recesses of Lebanon,
I felled its tallest cedars,
its choicest cypresses;
I came to its remotest height,
its densest forest.
I dug wells and drank the waters,
and I dried up with the sole of my foot
all the streams of Egypt."

Isaiah 37:24-25

The earth mourns and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed the laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.

Isaiah 24:4-5



"But this is a people
robbed and plundered...
they have become a prey
with none to rescue."
Isaiah 42:22

"Thorns shall grow over its strongholds,
nettles and thistles in its fortresses.
It shall be the haunt of jackals."
Isaiah 34:13

Site of the ancient Temple of Patchakama
Lord of Creation

"From generation to generation
it shall lie waste
none shall pass through it
for ever and ever."
Isaiah 34:10

CHURCH AND SOCIETY DOCUMENTS

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